

## Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the Representation of Oriental Women in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*

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**ABSTRACT.** Edward Said's groundbreaking text, *Orientalism* is a contrapuntal reading of imperial discourse about the non-Western Other. It indicates that the Western intellectual is in the service of the hegemonic culture. In this influential text, Said shows how imperial and colonial hegemony is implicated in discursive and textual production. *Orientalism* is a critique of Western texts that have represented the East as an exotic and inferior other and construct the Orient by a set of recurring stereotypical images and clichés. Said's analysis of Orientalism shows the negative stereotypes or images of native women as well. As a result, *Orientalism* has engendered feminist scholarship and debate in Middle East studies. For Said, many Western scholars, orientalists, colonial authorities and writers systematically created the orientalist discourse and the misrepresentation of the Orient. George Orwell as a Western writer experienced imperialism at first hand while serving as an Assistant Superintendent of Imperial Police in Burma from 1922 to 1927. One of Orwell's major concerns during his life was the issue of imperialism and colonialism which is reflected in his first published novel, *Burmese Days*. Orwell's own political purpose in this novel was to convince the reader that imperialism was morally wrong. Although he saw imperialism as one of the major injustices of his time and had declared himself against Empire, in *Burmese Days*, Orwell, consciously and unconsciously, repudiated his views and followed the Orientalist discourse. In this study, the authors demonstrate how Orwell maintains a white male Eurocentric imperialist viewpoint. The authors attempt to examine how the 'female subalterns' are represented in *Burmese Days*. While Oriental women are represented as the oppressed ones, they are also regarded as being submissive, voiceless, seductive and promiscuous.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented".

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

The term Orientalism was popularized by Edward Said's groundbreaking text, *Orientalism*, in which he examines the process by which the West has 'Orientalized' the Orient. By Orientalism Said means the collection of stereotypes, distortions, myths, and fantasies which the Occident (the West) has imposed in order to dominate it. Orientalism, as an academic discipline, was also a Western style of thought, "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said, 1978: 1). Using Michel Foucault's concept of discourse, Said argues that, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient-dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (ibid: 3) Said's purpose is to examine Orientalism and to show "how the will to examine Orientalism" and "how the will to

exercise dominant control ... has ... discovered a way to clothe, disguise, rarefy, and wrap itself systematically in the language of truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value and knowledge” (Said, 1983: 216). Such language is all the more effective because of its “naturalness, authority, professionalism, assertiveness, and anti-theoretical directness”(ibid.).

According to Said, the orientalist ‘creates’ the Orient through his writing. In the process, he helps in the creation of a series of stereotypical images, according to which Europe (the West, the ‘self’) is seen as being essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, virtuous, normal and masculine, while the Orient (the East, the ‘other’) (a sort of surrogate version of the West or the ‘self’) is seen as being irrational, backward, despotic, inferior, depraved, aberrant and feminine sexually. (Macfie, 2002: 8) According to Leela Gandhi, “Said... diagnoses Orientalism as a discourse which invents or orientalises the Orient for the purposes of imperial consumption”. (Gandhi, 1998: 88) Said believes that this discourse of Orientalism does not give a realistic portrayal of Eastern Others but rather constructs them based on Western anxieties and preoccupations. Said examines how Western texts construct the orient through imaginative representations. The idea of representation is usually based on a notion of being faithful to the original. However, representation is largely interwoven with many other things besides ‘truth’. It is defined not just by inherent common subject matter, but also by a common history, tradition, and universe of discourse that exists within a particular field (Said, 1978: 272-273). Representation is a phenomenon created by writers, intellectuals, artists, commentators, travelers, politicians, as well as others working within similar discursive formations. For Said, the West’s representation of the East works within the framework of a conscious and determined effort at subordination. Orientalism, this Western discourse about the Orient, has always served to legitimize and perpetuate the interests of the Western imperialism. It has traditionally served hegemonic purposes. As Hans Bertens explains in *Literary Theory: The Basics*,

For Said, Western representations of the Orient, no matter how well intentioned, have always been part of this damaging discourse. Wittingly or unwittingly, they have always been complicit with the workings of Western power. Even those Orientalists who are clearly in sympathy with Oriental peoples and their cultures — and Said finds a substantial number of them — cannot overcome their Eurocentric perspective and have unintentionally contributed to Western domination. So instead of the disinterested objectivity in the service of the higher goal of true knowledge that Western scholarship has traditionally claimed for itself, we find invariably false representations that have effectively paved the way for military domination, cultural displacement, and economic exploitation. (Bertens, 2001: 204)

In *Orientalism*, Said mentions many examples of orientalism that appears in the works of European scholars, poets, philosophers, imperial administrators, political theorists, historians, politicians, travel writers and others. Said believes that it is part of an integrated discourse, an accepted grid for filtering the Orient into the Western consciousness, and an ‘integral part of European *material* civilisation and culture’ — an instrument of Western imperialism. (Macfie, 2002: 9) It is evident that, in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a close correlation existed between orientalism, as a profession, and the expansion of European commerce and the colonialism and imperialism to which it eventually gave rise.

Said's work *Orientalism* opened up the possibility for others to go further than Said had in exploring the gender and sexuality of Orientalist discourse itself. *Orientalism* has engendered feminist scholarship and debate in Middle East studies. In her book *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (1994), an account of Western travel writing in the Near and Middle East, Rana Kabbani, a Muslim feminist, journalist and student of English and Arabic literature, educated in America and England, finds wholly in favour of Said's thesis: that there exists a predetermined discourse regarding the Orient; that Western travel writers, inescapably subservient to that discourse, were deeply implicated in the imperialist project; and that Western culture was itself to some extent

shaped by distorted representations of the East (the Orient, the other, the opposite, the enemy, the foil). European travel writers created a series of self-confirming stereotypical images of the East – as alien, timeless, jealous, irrational, cruel, lethargic and lascivious – designed to codify, comprehend and ultimately rule over the Orient.

In Kabbani's view, the representations of women, constructed by writers like Burton, reflected a standard Victorian prejudice, namely that all women were inferior to men; and that oriental women were doubly inferior, being both women and orientals. Women, that is to say, were part of the goods of empire, the living rewards available to men. They were there to be used sexually, and if it could be suggested that they were inherently licentious, then they could be exploited without misgiving. Orientalism makes assumptions about gender. Similarly, popular gendered stereotypes circulated such as the sexually promiscuous exotic Oriental female. The exoticised Oriental female, often depicted nude or partially-clothed in hundreds of Western works of art during the colonial period, was presented as an immodest, active creature of sexual pleasure who held the key to a myriad of mysterious erotic delights. In *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Meyda Yegenoglu points out that, "... when Said discusses the ways in which the Oriental woman is represented in Flaubert's works, he alludes to the uniform association established between the Orient and sex". (Yegenoglu, 1998: 25) In the following few lines Said argues that,

Woven through all of Flaubert's Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost *uniform association between the Orient and sex*. In making this association Flaubert was neither the first nor the most exaggerated instance of a remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient . . . *Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate...* Nevertheless one must acknowledge its importance as something eliciting complex responses, sometimes even a frightening self-discovery, in the Orientalists, and Flaubert was an interesting case in point. (Said, 1978:188, emphasis added)

As Said notes, when Flaubert slept with an Egyptian courtesan, Kuchuk Hanem, he wrote to Louise Colet that "the oriental woman is no more than a machine; she makes no distinction between one man and another man". (Said, 1978: 187) In so doing (and in his subsequent novels) he "produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman". (Ibid. p: 6) But within this influential narrative, "she never spoke of herself, never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was typically Oriental ". (ibid) We can imagine how different her own account might indeed have been. Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled. Said's work has been immensely important and has given rise to a wealth of studies of how colonial discourse constructs the Other. In this article the researchers would like to focus on the representation of the female subject, the "gendered subaltern," (Spivak) in *Burmese Days* (1934) by George Orwell.

## 2. DOUBLE COLONISATION OF ORIENTAL WOMEN

Ever since the beginning of human existence, patriarchal order has had a great impact on almost everything in the world. Patriarchy is also a part of colonization. Colonization is itself a masculine phenomenon in which the male colonizers victimize native women. The construction of native women in terms of recognizable roles, images, models, and labels occurs in Oriental discourse. The terms of such construction are to be sought in the dominant modes of ideology (patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism). What is required here is an alertness to the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized.

Postcolonial studies increasingly emphasize gender roles, especially when dealing with the impact of the colonial process on the women. That women in the colonized society suffer from exploitation by both colonized and indigenous power structure is well understood. For example, in his definitive study of colonialism *Postcolonialism* Robert Young points out the double exploitation of women by the patriarchal structures of both colonial power and colonized indigenous societies:

For women, the problem centered on the fact that the conditions against which they were campaigning were the product of two kinds of oppression which put the antagonists of the nationalist struggle in the same camp: patriarchal systems of exploitation were common to both colonial regimes and indigenous societies. Women therefore had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms. (Young, 2001: 379)

Young's remarks refer directly to native women. By both colonizing and indigenous cultures, it will be clear that under colonialism native women are doubly oppressed and exploited by colonization. McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism* explains that the term 'a double colonisation' refers to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. Women are subject to representation in colonial discourses in ways which collude with patriarchal values. Thus the phrase 'a double colonisation' refers to the fact that women are twice colonized — by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too. (McLeod, 2000:175). In *Imperial Fictions*, Rana Kabbani looks at the production of the Eastern female as a figure of licentiousness, and Western heterosexual male desires, in travel writing and paintings of the 'Oriental' woman and the harem. Kabbani shows how the depiction of Eastern women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries objectified them as exotic creatures who epitomized and promised the assumed excessive sexual delights of the Orient. She shows how in reading these representations we must be aware of the mutually supportive processes of colonialism and patriarchy which produce Eastern women in eroticized terms.

Colonialism operated very differently for women and men, and the 'double colonization' that resulted when women were subject both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as women needs to be taken into account in any analysis of colonial oppression. Leela Gandhi points out that some postcolonial theorists regard "the third-world woman as victim par excellence — the forgotten casualty of both imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies". (Gandhi, 1998: 83) Thus the double oppression suffered by native women should be underscored. For they are in Lois Tyson's words "the victims of both colonialist ideology, which devalues them because of their race and cultural ancestry, and patriarchal ideology, which devalues them because of their sex. Sadly, these women have suffered patriarchal oppression not only at the hands of colonialists, but within their own patriarchal cultures as well". (Lois Tyson, 2006: 421) Within the colonized societies, where male domination also occurs, the women are further viewed as a subgroup by their own men, which in turn justifies their continued subservient status.

*Burmese Days*, as a colonial novel, includes some highly relevant passages about the exploitation of native women by both European and native males in the colony and puts the females into a subaltern situation. In other words, the novel tells us the story of the subordination of Eastern women and the domination and exploitation of European and non-European males over the native women.

### Preview

For Said, controversy about the postcolonial discourse begins with the term representation. In his words, "It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries". (Said, 1978: p 57) Said believes that one cannot distinguish between representation and misrepresentation. It's all a matter of degree. As he argues about the misrepresentation of Islam by the Westerners, he points out that:

...The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one ( as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many things besides the “truth”, which is itself a representation (Said, 1978: 272).

Within the arena of representation much of the drama of colonialist relations has taken place. In both conquest and colonisation, texts and textuality played a major part. European texts—anthropologies, histories, fiction, captured the non-European subject within European frameworks which read his or her alterity as terror or lack. Within the complex relations of colonialism these representations were reprojected to the colonised—through formal education or general colonialist cultural relations—as authoritative pictures of themselves. Concomitantly representations of Europe and Europeans within this textual archive were situated as normative. Such texts—the representations of Europe to itself, and the representation of others to Europe—were not accounts of different peoples and societies, but a projection of European fears and desires masquerading as scientific/‘objective’ knowledges. Said’s *Orientalism* examines the process by which this discursive formation emerges.

Alleke Bohmer in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* points out that “Said’s assumptions in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), is that cultural representations were central to the process of colonizing other lands. To assume control over a territory or a nation was not only to exert political or economic power; it was also to have imaginative command. The belief here is that colonialist and postcolonial literatures did not simply articulate colonial or nationalist preoccupations; they also contributed to the making, definition, and clarification of those same preoccupations. Symbols from well-known stories, for example, were enlisted by Europeans in their attempt to make sense of strange and complex worlds beyond the seas. The myriad writings of empire, not poems and novels only, but more functional texts such as law reports, journalistic articles, and anthropological journals, were often ornately figural and full of literary allusion. Nor was the colonial system alone in its collaboration with imaginative writing” (Bohmer, 2005: 5)

One of the key themes that colonialist literature is concerned with is the representation of other peoples. British Empire in India as represented in the fiction of Kipling, Forster and Orwell is a male domain. In their colonial novels, the Orient and Orientals are viewed through the lens of a Western writer who has taken the upper hand to manipulate, construct and re-present the Orient. These Western writers are responsible for the stereotyped and superficial vision of the nineteenth-century native woman that has remained current ever since as being truly representative of the whole species. In their works, the colonial female subjects are represented by an ambivalence of desire and disdain. They are mysterious yet untrustworthy, sexually arousing yet not quite clean, intriguing and yet uninteresting. This ambivalent attitude can be found in George Orwell’s colonial novel, *Burmese Days*. For the portrayal of native women, Orwell relies on the Western stereotypes of Oriental women. In fact, a set of stereotypes and clichés are attributed to the women that have contributed to Orientalize them. Leela Gandhi in her book *Postcolonial Theory* seems to be making the same point by arguing that “Orientalism becomes a discourse at the point at which it starts *systematically* to produce stereotypes about Orientals and the Orient” (Gandhi, 1998: 77, emphasis added).

### 3. METHOD: CONTRAPUNTAL READING OF AN ORIENTALIST TEXT, A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said employs a mode of reading that he calls ‘contrapuntal’. A contrapuntal reading is a way of “reading back” and providing counterpoints to the texts of Western literature, in order to reveal the extent to which they are deeply implicated in the process of imperialism and colonialism. (Marandi, 2005: 171) This responsive reading enables the critic to

reveal the colonial implications that are hidden in the texts. In this method the critic accentuates the affiliations of the text, its origin in social and cultural reality rather than stressing its connections with English literature and canonical criteria, so that the critic can disclose cultural and political implications that are implicitly addressed in the text. (Ashcroft, et al, 2000: 56) In Said's words, "As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but contrapuntally" (Said, 1993: 51). In this influential text, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said points out how the nineteenth-century novel played a critical role in the actual formation and enforcement of empire. He also stresses the indispensable role that culture plays in the development of imperialism. "The overarching implication," says Ashcroft, "is the extent to which English society and culture was grounded on the ideology and practices of imperialism" (Ashcroft, 2000: 56). In practical terms, 'contrapuntal reading' of a text is a counter-narrative which penetrates beneath the surface of a text to elaborate the presence of Orientalist attitudes of the author in canonical literature in order to reveal the political worldliness of the text and the complicity of Western writing with imperial power.

#### 4. GEORGE ORWELL AND REPRESENTATION OF ORIENTAL WOMEN

George Orwell (1903-50) has been a controversial writer who produced both fictional and non-fictional writing which has provoked diverse critical responses. The very fact that *Burmese Days* is one of the pillars of the Orwell canon has ensured that the work remains subject to scholarly study. Orwell's biographers have tended to treat *Burmese Days* and "Shooting the Elephant" as the major primary sources for his life in Burma, where he served with the Indian Imperial Police from 1922 to 1927. Orwell's books were closely related to the historical events and political issues of his time. *Burmese Days* reflected the decline of British imperialism. It is an example of Western writing which is in opposition to empire and at the same time complicit with imperial power. Orwell's novel can be considered as emblematic of the cultural tradition Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) shows to be inextricable from European colonialism. *Burmese Days* is an example of writing from the colonial period that directly addresses colonial life in Burma. This article examines Orwell's portrayal of native women in *Burmese Days*. This novel includes some highly relevant passages about the exploitation of native women by both European and native males in the colony and puts the females into a subaltern situation.

In contrast to the popularity of George Orwell and his books, especially in the third world countries, as a rebel for a just cause and a freedom fighter, there exists a duality in the way he treats his subject matter in *Burmese Days*. It does much to demonstrate Orwell's attitude towards the Burmese women and their negative representation. One of the first descriptions in this novel is that of Burmese children; there are plenty of naked native children who crawl about performing any bodily function openly. As there are no British children present in the novel, the sheer number of native children produces a negative reaction towards the Burmese women. It seems as if they breed like rabbits. They are perceived reductively as reproductive subjects. Native women are also represented as sexual objects and mistresses. Like most of the single British men, Flory had taken a young Burmese woman, Ma Hla May, as a mistress. He had "bought her from her parents...for three hundred rupees." (Orwell,31) He had no feelings towards her but simply used her for sex and otherwise treated her with distaste. Burmese women are merely objects of sexual pleasure for Flory. Native women in *Burmese Days* are fully described and are usually compared with animals while the beauty of English women attracts Orwell's attention to the extent that he focuses on their faces to suggest their beauty. He also follows the conservative middle class propriety by not describing the body of the British women, while he does not follow their code of conduct for the Burmese women. In this vein, Ma Hla May is most of the time represented as a kitten and a mare. The point about Ma Hla May is that her status as a Burmese peasant's daughter makes her childishly easy to objectify. The sense that Flory has stripped her of her autonomy comes across especially strongly in some early descriptive passages, which rely heavily on the iconography of prostitution. Unlike the compassionate, defiant and sweetly practical women whom Orwell's protagonists fall in love with in his other novels, Ma Hla May is a mass of hard lines and angular gestures. Her body is as

‘contourless as a bas-relief carved upon a tree’(30), her hair is ‘coiled like a tight black cylinder’(ibid.), her skin is the ‘colour of new copper’(ibid.). Her only interests in life seem to be acquiring trinkets and flaunting herself in front of her fellow villagers. The third person narrator of *Burmese Days* elaborates on the hatefulness of the Burmese women by bringing the views of Elizabeth, a white Englishwoman, “These Burmese women repelled Elizabeth more than men; she felt her kinship with them, and the hatefulness of being kin to creatures with Black faces”. (71)

John Flory is not above exploiting Burmese women and his special status as a European man, when such exploitation suit him. The way Flory treats Ma Hla May and ruins her indicates that a Burmese woman is of little worth for him. By appearing Elizabeth, he has to end his clandestine sexual relationship with Ma Hla May and this little worth for Ma Hla May vanishes for good. According to Sardar: “Power is an essential ingredient of Orientalism. For amongst the fascinations of the relationship with the iconic Oriental woman is the use of power to be cruel and inflict punishment”. (Sardar, 1999:10) Flory enjoys referring to and thinking of Ma Hla May as a slave, a slave being one to whom one can be cruel, that one can punish with impunity and whose function by definition is to be humiliated. This is how imperial powers saw their subject people. In Sardar’s words, “Orientalism justified both the exploitation of Asian people and their political subjugation”.(ibid.)

The notion of ‘double colonization’ — i.e. that women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies can be applied to native women in *Burmese Days*. The native women such as Ma Hla May are in the unprivileged positions. Ma Hla May is double colonized by Flory as a male and as an agent of the empire. In *Burmese Days*, rape becomes an unquestioned privilege and by-product of masculine colonial ambivalence, a fact of life as banal and unremarkable as the corruption in the jails and hospitals. As Nancy Paxton asserts in *Writing Under the Raj*, the masculinist world of this text remains “devoid of honor, admiration or love, a world in which rape is evacuated of its symbolic meanings” (Lazaro, 2001: 258). All of the male characters, native or English, enjoy the right to rape women. The Burmese villain U Po Kyin is widely known as a rapist of young girls; Tom Lackersteen, Elizabeth’s uncle, hires Burmese prostitutes whenever he is stationed away from his wife; Maxwell, the Divisional Forest Officer, carries on with a Eurasian woman named Molly Pereira; and the protagonist John Flory has had countless affairs with ‘aged Jewish whores’ (38), with Eurasian women, and with a ‘full hundred’ (120) Burmese prostitutes whose faces and names he cannot recall. The narrator of *Burmese Days* glosses over the ramifications of the male characters’ unrestricted sexual access, leaving unconsidered and unchallenged an enormous network of sexual and cultural power-struggles.

Flory’s relationships with his mistress Ma Hla May reveals his physical and moral inertia. Flory feels guilty about Ma Hla May, whom he literally owns after buying her from her parents. She is presented as a mercenary, disloyal and exploitative woman who has no affection for Flory, and uses him to acquire status and money. After the sordid encounter with her in chapter 4, Flory walks several miles into the jungle and bathes in a clear pool, a cleansing ritual which temporarily washes away his guilt.

When Ma Hla May and the young Englishwoman meet for the first time, she immediately sees her disadvantage as a Burmese woman when pitted against an Englishwoman for the attentions of an Englishman. By contrast, Elizabeth has the luxury of not even being certain that Ma Hla May is female; moreover, she could never conceive of a Burmese woman as a threat to herself. Elizabeth is used to being the standard by which conventions of femaleness are judged. The thought of competing with a Burmese woman for Flory’s attentions or for anything else, for that matter, would be completely beyond and, to her mind, beneath her. It is when Flory intercedes in this meeting that we see an example of his exploitation of his position of superiority for his own aims. In response to Ma Hla May’s inquiry about the identity of the Englishwoman, Flory “answered casually, as though giving an order to a servant: ‘Go away this instant. If you make any trouble I will afterwards take a bamboo and beat you till not one of your ribs is whole’” (52). Once Ma Hla May heeds his cold-blooded warning and leaves, Flory lies to Elizabeth by telling her that the woman who has just left

is "[o]ne of the servants' wives, I believe". (ibid.) In this incident, Flory exploits his privilege as an Englishman by threatening a Burmese woman.

An interesting detail appears in Orwell's depiction of Ma Hla May. "She believed that lechery was a form of witchcraft, giving a woman magical powers over a man, until in the end she could weaken him to a half-idiotic slave. Each successive embrace sapped Flory's will and made the spell stronger... this was her belief" (32). In the scene in which she begs Flory to take her back, to let her live in his house even if he marries Elizabeth, this motive again appears: "Perhaps even now she thought that with her arms around him and her body against his she could renew her power over him" (95). We see the situation only from his point of view, which includes the usual wretched admission of guilt, after he casts her out. Since Flory's viewpoint predominates, the reader is invited to consider Ma Hla May as, in fact, a money-grubbing prostitute from beginning to end.

There is a scene when Flory asks Elizabeth to explain why she snubbed him that morning, Elizabeth clings to the pretext that she has discovered he was keeping a Burmese woman. And now, though Flory thinks the accusation isn't even true (since he had recently thrown out Ma Hla May), he recognizes his guilt:

He had not even the heart to be angry any longer. For he had perceived, with the deadly self-knowledge and self-loathing that come to one at such a time, that what had happened served him perfectly right. For a moment it seemed to him that an endless procession of Burmese women, a regiment of ghosts, were marching past him in the moonlight. Heavens, what numbers of them! A thousand no, but a full hundred at the least.... Their heads turned towards him, but they had no faces, only featureless discs.... The gods are just and of our pleasant vices (pleasant, indeed!) make instruments to plague us. He had dirtied himself beyond redemption, and this was his just punishment. (120)

But Flory's awareness, as this passage shows, is deeply flawed. He, in effect, feels guilty about the wrong thing: He has "dirtied himself beyond redemption" (ibid) the very words suggest the sahib's view of a dangerous social descent and the possibility of contamination whenever he engages in sexual relations with native women. Flory's failure to accept responsibility for his action is evident when Ma Hla May suddenly appears and corners him, just as he had cornered Elizabeth. She demands money and threatens to make a scene, and Flory's guilt at once changes into anger and the desire to humiliate her. Flory deliberately throws on the ground the money and the cigarette case she has extracted from him. In this scene Ma Hla May is described as a wretched woman following him "like a disobedient dog" (121). There is an inevitability about Flory's interactions with her that is in sharp contrast to Orwell's critique of imperialism.

The patriarchal and colonial struggles are more obvious in the relationships between European men and native women. European men who cannot sufficiently manifest their masculine exploitations on European women can easily carry out this masculine exploitation of native women. Therefore, while European women are exploited once, native women are exploited twice. Civilized European men who are honourable, modest, and polite to European women become cruel, brutish and sadistic to native women. Native women are often exploited or abused sexually, and in short they cannot speak.

In the novel, Flory's harsh treatment of his native mistress Ma Hla May shows how a European man abuses a native woman as he wishes. When Elizabeth comes to Flory's house she sees Flory's mistress and she asks, "was that a man or a woman?" "A woman" he says. "One of the servant's wives." (Orwell, 52) In order to manage the situation of two women, Flory tells a lie. Then, he sends her away from the house. "Ma Hla May knew, and all the servants knew, that he was getting rid of her because of Elizabeth." (68) Flory, to convince her, writes a cheque. However, Ma Hla May "turned a face full of fury and despair towards Flory, screaming over and over, 'Thakin!, Thakin!, Thakin!, Thakin!'" (ibid) This relationship between Flory and Ma Hla May



shows that Flory's interest in her is just sexual desire. Throughout the novel we see that the native woman only tries to say a few words. Then, she does not speak or cannot speak. In this novel, there is not a native woman who speaks and who is heard, listened, understood and respected to by any. As Loomba suggests there is the interrelation between colonial and sexual domination in colonial writings:

The spectre of miscegenation most graphically brings together anxieties about female sexuality and racial purity, and, as colonial contacts widen and deepen, it increasingly haunts European and Euro-American culture. These various ways of positioning and erasing women in colonial writings indicate the intricate overlaps between colonial and sexual domination. (Loomba, 1998: 159)

Moreover, when a European woman comes to a colony, the native wives are dismissed because they know that European women cannot accept a polygamous life. Flory knows that if he dismisses his native wife, he is not going to lose anything. In other words, before Elizabeth's arrival, he was just sexually satisfying himself with Ma Hla May, but now with Elizabeth he expects to share his feelings, have an emotional courtship and perhaps marriage. In spite of his *liberal* views on Burma and his critical view of the Empire, Flory is a white man and never considers marrying nonwhite, and thus he shows himself to be caught in the very same discourse that he is so critical of. He sees Elizabeth, in contrast, as a genteel culture bearer, homemaker, civilizing agent. Urmila Seshagiri in *The Road From George Orwell* argues that:

Although Orwell mocks the gap between imperialism's noble rhetoric and its ignoble practices, the novel leaves untouched the sexual violence that pervades Empire's territories. *Burmese Days* confines its critiques to relationships between men, ignoring (and, indeed, naturalizing) the sexual tyranny that oppresses female characters. Orwell's failure to suggest that women, too, suffer from the various displacements of colonialism obviates narrative attention to the persistent devaluation of women's bodies and desires. (Lazaro, 2001: 106)

*Burmese Days* blames Ma Hla May for her complicity with Western imperialism, never acknowledging how an imperial power structure leaves native women materially impoverished. For two years, Ma Hla May comes to his house for afternoon tea, sex, and financial compensation. The narrator undercuts her assertions of love for Flory by claiming that "It was the idle concubine's life that she loved, and the visits to her village dressed in all her finery, when she could boast of her position as a 'bo-kadaw' – a white man's wife; for she had persuaded everyone, herself included, that she was Flory's wife". (31) But this self-delusion arises as a consequence of imperialist misogyny; Ma Hla May's fascination with Flory's white skin and the sense of power it gave her demonstrates not the essential baseness of her pretensions, but the structural limitations of living as a native woman under colonial rule.

Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' provides a useful formulation of the textual and historical forces that produce Ma Hla May's character. The sexual economy of Western colonialism, Spivak argues, traps native women in a troubled cultural interstice:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak, 1988: 102)

The cultural tension between ‘tradition’ (i.e., village life outside Kyauktada) and ‘modernization’ (i.e., the privilege of being a white man’s mistress) determines Ma Hla May’s initial desire for Flory as well as her later alienation from social stability.

Flory discards Ma Hla May when he begins courting Elizabeth Lackersteen. She becomes a disposable, replaceable commodity, like the other Burmese women who have preceded her in Flory’s bed. Ma Hla May’s futile efforts to reinstate herself as Flory’s mistress reduce her, literally, to the ‘violent shuttling’ that Spivak claims is the inevitable condition of native women under imperial rule. Ma Hla May discovers that an abandoned Burmese woman has no place either in her native social fabric or in the culture of white colonial authority:

Two years I was your wife, you loved me and cared for me, and then without warning, without reason, you drove me from your door like a dog. And I must go back to my village, with no money, with all my jewels and silk *longyis* gone, and the people will point and say, ‘There is Ma Hla May who thought herself cleverer than the rest of us. And behold! Her white man has treated her as they always do.’ I am ruined, ruined! What man will marry me after I have lived two years in your house? (93)

As Ma Hla May moves desperately between her native village and Flory’s house, unable to occupy any socially-stable role, she falls into what Gayatri Spivak calls ‘a violent aporia between subject and object status’ (Spivak, 102). Burmese patriarchy has denied her economic self-sufficiency; the English ‘pukka sahib’s code’ mandates that a white officer cannot support her while wooing a white woman. Further, the narrator refuses to dignify her protests against Flory’s callous treatment, assuring us that ‘If she wept and grovelled it was only for the position she had once had as his mistress, the idle life, the rich clothes and dominion over servants’ (95). Ma Hla May therefore takes her revenge on Flory in the only way she can: by using her liminal cultural position to humiliate him in front of his white English colleagues.

At the novel’s climax, when Flory believes that he and Elizabeth Lackersteen will soon be married, Ma Hla May bursts into an English church service and shrieks out the truth about her liaison with Flory. Her power in this scene, ironically, comes from vocalizing her *lack* of power. In front of the all-white congregation, Ma Hla May wails about the poverty and social stigma that have ensued from Flory’s neglect. To emphasize her abjection, she tears off her clothes and cries

Look at me, you white men, and you women, too, look at me! Look how he has ruined me! Look at these rags I am wearing! And he sitting there, the liar, the coward, pretending not to see me! He would let me starve at his gate like a pariah dog. Ah, but I will shame you! Turn around and look at me! Look at this body that you have kissed a thousand times – look – look –. (169)

The spectacle of Ma Hla May’s unclothed body makes public Flory’s transgression of the pukka sahib’s code; Orwell forces Ma Hla May to present herself as a metonym for the racial and sexual Otherness that are anathema to white imperial self-fashioning. While rape and prostitution are naturalized and otherwise unpunished in the world of this novel, being publicly humiliated at the hands of a traditionally-abject native woman is cause enough for Flory’s suicide. Deliberately posturing as a degenerate woman, Ma Hla May abases her own body in order to bring about Flory’s downfall. Alok Rai in *Orwell and the Politics of Despair* asserts that, “In the last scene, stripping herself before the shocked mourners, forcing them (and us) to look at her, Ma Hla May acquires — through the author — a sluttish dignity”. (Rai, 1988: 36)

But this self-inflicted violence fails to restore Ma Hla May to social stability. Ma Hla May does not reap the fruits of her performances: she neither regains the privilege of being Flory's mistress nor emerges the moral victor in their battle. Following Flory's suicide, the narrator tells us, condescendingly, that "Ma Hla May is in a brothel in Mandalay. Her good looks are all but gone, and her clients pay her only four annas and sometimes kick her and beat her. Perhaps more bitterly than any of the others, she regrets the good time when Flory was alive, and when she had not the wisdom to put aside any of the money she extracted from him". (176)

The moral architecture of *Burmese Days* casts the wages of feminine greed as dehumanization and violence, and Ma Hla May's already-precarious status as a 'bo-kadaw,' or white man's wife, collapses into the silent imprisonment of a prostitute with no autonomy. Ugly, abused, regretful, and penniless, Ma Hla May's residence in the brothel renders her the powerless commodity of textually-sanctioned male desire. The unquestioned devaluation of dark-skinned native women structures Ma Hla May's life-narrative and makes the Mandalay brothel her final destination. Orwell constructs a narrative which represents native women as instrumental and victims.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Literary texts written through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century helped sustain the colonial vision, giving reinforcement to an already insular colonial world. Western writers are responsible for the stereotyped images of the native woman that has remained current ever since as being truly representative of the whole species. It is suggested that there is a contradiction between what Orwell writes in his essays and what he seems to espouse with regards to non-European nations. His novel, *Burmese Days* shows how, consciously and unconsciously, Orwell repudiated his own views and treats foreigners as "Others". It is argued that the portrayal of Oriental female subjects shows Orwell's traditional view of a European middle-class man towards Oriental women. Orwell as a European writer follows the tradition of portraying Oriental women as mistresses and sexual objects, submissive and voiceless.

In *Burmese Days*, Ma Hla May is seen as tempting Flory to sexual impurity. Ma Hla May is ultimately merely a toy for Flory, and he easily dispenses with her when Elizabeth diverts his attention. Throughout the novel, Ma Hla May was objectified by the magistrate as by her parents and Flory. In short, in *Burmese Days* like other colonial novels, a web of colonial images and cultural stereotypes are attributed to the Burmese women which fix them in their inferior position. Burmese women are reduced to the level of objects and animals.

As a result, the representation of the native women in *Burmese Days* and designation of some stereotypes and clichés to the Orientals follow Said's model which is elaborated in his *Orientalism*. Edward Said's contention is that nineteenth-century European culture, and especially the English novel, unwittingly but systematically helped to gain consent for imperialist policies. Said's analysis of Orientalism shows the negative stereotypes or images of women. For most European travellers and Orientalists, however, the promise of sexual pleasure rested on the assumption that the darker races or non-Europeans were immoral, promiscuous, libidinous and always desired white people.

Said set out to show how the 'Orient' was systematically created by the discourses of writers, colonial authorities and scholars. Built around a distinction between 'East' and 'West', Orientalism constructed the Orient, determining largely what could be said about this constructed entity and acting as a basis for European justification of its imperialism. Said describes Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". (Said, 1987: 3) Representations of the eastern woman depict her exotic allure bound up inextricably with the western fear of the savage nature of the east, inherent within the west's 'orientalist' vision. The Orient suggests "not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire" (Said, 1979: 188).

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